MYSTERIOUS PIRATE PORTRAIT

Jean L. Epperson

Displayed on the third floor of the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, Texas is a large oil painting of a handsome, brooding pirate. Speculation is that the man depicted is that of the pirate/privateer Jean Laffite. He preferred to sail legitimately with letters of mark but did not curtail his activities when his legal time limit expired.

The discovery of the portrait reads like romantic fiction. It surfaced during the nineteen seventies through a granddaughter of George Sealy, the Galveston business tycoon and founder of John Sealy Hospital. The family story says that one day in 1890, while excavating to prepare for the foundations of the George Sealy Mansion at Broadway between 24 and 25 Streets, a tin box was discovered with the pirate canvas rolled up in it. The home of E. B. Nichols had been razed on the site in preparation for the Sealy Mansion. Nichols had moved to Galveston in 1850 and was not there during Jean Laffite's tenure.

In 1970 the painting, in poor condition, with seven patches on the back and badly in need of cleaning, was sent to the Houston Fine Arts Museum to be evaluated and restored. The painting was said to be worth two thousand, to two thousand five hundred dollars after restoration. The professionals estimated that it was painted during the early part of the nineteenth century by an unknown artist. No signature or date was observed on the canvas. The restored painting was donated to the Rosenberg Library in 1979 by Mrs Jane Burton Pinckard of Houston.

Mysteries abound! Is the portrait a likeness of Jean Laffite? There is a certain resemblance to the early Telfer illustration of Jean Laffite, but the portrait is of a younger man. Who painted the portrait? The professionals would not even hazard a guess. Who buried the portrait and why? Did the Sealy family frame the canvas after it was found and hang it in the Sealy Mansion? Where was it from 1890 to 1970, some 80 years, when the framed picture was sent to the conservators? Readers, can you solve some of these mysteries?
Laffite Painting